

INSTABILITY IN FAMILY NETWORKS OF DIVORCED AND DISPUTING PARENTS

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ABSTRACT

Balance theory explains stability and change in the sentiment and unit relations of social networks. In this paper we have applied this theory to the significant family and social relations surrounding divorced and disputing parents in order to predict changes in sentiment and connectedness. Where divorced parents are actively hostile with each other, children are placed in an untenable situation. Balance theory suggests that in an attempt to reduce the tension and resolve the conflicting loyalties, children are likely to induce negative sentiment relations in their family network (e.g., towards a step-parent). This in turn provokes states of tension and emotional disequilibrium in other subsystems of the family (e.g., especially in a remarriage). Propagation of this disturbance from one subsystem to another, and hence continual instability in the family relations of the divorced, is expected as long as the parents continue to dispute bitterly. This model, in conjunction with the social-cognitive development of the child, explains why younger children typically show tension and rapid shifts in allegiance from one parent to the other, whereas older children frequently form unshakable coalitions with one parent against the other in response to the parental dispute. Support for

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these predictions is apparent from our extensive clinical observations of these families.

I. INTRODUCTION

The fact that families are unique or peculiar social institutions deserving of a special status in theory and research has blinded many theorists and clinicians to the fact that families also have very basic properties common to all small groups. They are a collectivity or network of individuals linked through the necessity of completing common tasks or achieving goals (e.g., child socialization), through emotional attachments and through culturally sanctioned bonds of kinship. The association of these individuals together is more or less voluntary and is, in general, enduring over long periods of time. In fact, even after divorce, the family group remains, albeit in a new form. This is because although the spousal relations are severed at divorce, there are no social sanctions for severing the parent-child relations (except in extreme cases of abuse and neglect). Moreover the necessity of completing the process of child rearing requires the collectivity to continue to function to some extent as a task group after divorce. Given that families are fundamentally small groups, then theories of interpersonal processes and social psychology can apply to them as to any other group. In fact we have found considerable utility in examining the divorcing family from this viewpoint.

Although hostility, anger, resentment, a sense of injustice, and moral outrage are common emotional elements of the divorce experience, not all parents continue to dispute following divorce. In most cases these negative affective reactions are time-limited or kept in check by parents concerned about protecting their children. In a significant proportion of post-divorce families however (about one-third), parents can become embroiled in ongoing bitter disputes over their children and the anger between them can remain undiminished for years following the separation (Ahrons 1981; Wallerstein and Kelly 1980). Such chronic conflict between former spouses takes various forms. It may involve a resistance to setting divorce matters; fear and avoidance of each other, along with a refusal to communicate about the children; pervading distrust and bitter acrimony; or angry confrontations, including threats and explosive violence. The fighting may occur outside the courts, or via repeated legal suits. The disputes may be continuous or episodic, triggered by other life events such as remarriage or developmental changes in the children.

In general, these parents are either frozen into a stance of unremitting negativity towards each other, or they are in a constant state of flux, alternating hostilities with brief respites of cooperativeness. What are most intriguing are the shifts that occur in the overt focus of the dispute. In

counseling these families, one is often frustrated in that after working to "fix-up" one strained relation (e.g., helping a child visit her divorced father against the wishes of the mother), problems break out in another quarter (e.g., the child fights with the stepmother and problems erupt in the new marriage). Alternatively, the counselor can easily become enmeshed in the system of disputing relations—i.e., become the central anchor which prevents the relations from disintegration or erupting in violence, or becomes impotent in effecting any change in persons who are locked into rigid negative views of each other. These frustrating but challenging clinical experiences compel us to seek some analytical tools with which to understand and intervene in these families.

In this paper we seek to examine the effects of parental hostility upon the system of family relations, focusing especially on the family unit formed by remarriage. It is not our present purpose to explore all the causes of these chronic disputes nor to examine their effects on the psychological health of the child, these being the important subject matters of other papers (Johnston et al. 1985a, 1985b, 1987, in press; Johnston and Campbell 1986; Johnston in press).

In conceptualizing what is happening in the network of family relations as a whole, we have found balance theory (Heider 1946, 1958; Newcombe 1953; Cartwright and Harary 1956) to be particularly useful in understanding the systemic process involved. The composition of some typical post-divorce family networks is modeled in terms of this theory in order to (a) determine the balance (stability) of the system as a whole, (b) identify those family members who are most in tension and stress, and (c) propose likely changes that will occur as the network strives towards balance. In order to make this abstract social-psychological theory more appropriate to intimate family relations, we need to make certain assumptions about the relative strength of attachment between these parents and their children, and also take into account the social-cognitive development level of the child (Piaget 1932, Selman 1980). Hence, this paper represents an endeavor to explicitly use a combination of basic social-psychological and child developmental theories to explain instability in the networks of divorced and disputing families. This paper is intended to be primarily an integration and application of theory. Our extensive clinical observations of 75 divorcing couples who are entrenched in custody disputes over their 92 children (aged 2–12 years) are compared to the predictions of the model. The data we use is reported more descriptively elsewhere (Johnston et al., 1985b; Johnston and Campbell, 1986).¹

II. BALANCE THEORY

Heider (1946, 1958) developed a general social-psychological theory to explain the pattern of affective ties between persons in social situations.

He defines two basic ways in which persons can be related. First they can have some form of sentiment or affective feeling towards one another. These sentiment relations are broadly classed into positive or negative (positive include liking, loving, admiring etc. and negative include hating, despising, disliking, etc.) Second, they can be related through some form of unit connection. A unit relation between a person and another means that they are perceived as belonging together in some way, by virtue of their similarity, proximity, causality, membership, or ownership. In our case, the unit relations are kinship bonds.

Heider observed a tendency for people to have positive feelings for those with whom they are connected in any way. On the other hand, if people do not like those with whom they are connected (by a unit relation), he observed tension in the system and forces (proportional to the amount of tension) arising to bring about change. Either the sentiment relations change (e.g., the person would come to feel differently about the other) or the unit relations would dissolve through action or cognitive reorganization (e.g., the person in reality moves out of the relationship or psychologically dissociates self from the other). Heider proposed then that sentiment relations and unit relations will move towards a state of "balance" and that these balanced states will be stable and persist.

He developed a rather simple rule for determining if any dyad or triad is balanced: *a social relation between any two or three persons is balanced if unit relations exist and if there are all positive or an even number of negative relations. Otherwise it will be unbalanced and unstable.* It is important to remember that balance does not necessarily imply a positive, healthy, or desirable state, it simply means stability of the system or resistance to change. The idea of balance was originally applied to just two or three persons and later extended by Cartwright and Harary (1956) to any number of persons in a social network. They also took into account the degree of imbalance in the system. Although we will analyze networks of more than three persons, to simplify the analysis for purposes of exposition, we will consider only the balance properties of the component dyads and triads in the network. This is not an unrealistic simplification given that the balance states of these smaller units (dyads and triads) are more salient (have greater influence or power) than those of larger units. Whereas Heider's account of balance was p-centric (i.e., it took the perspective of only one person in the system), Newcombe (1953) developed the theory to show how mutually positive or negative relations are likely to be generated. On the basis of this development, we will assume symmetry of perception i.e. that positive or negative sentiments are reciprocated. This is not an unreasonable assumption in the light of our observations.

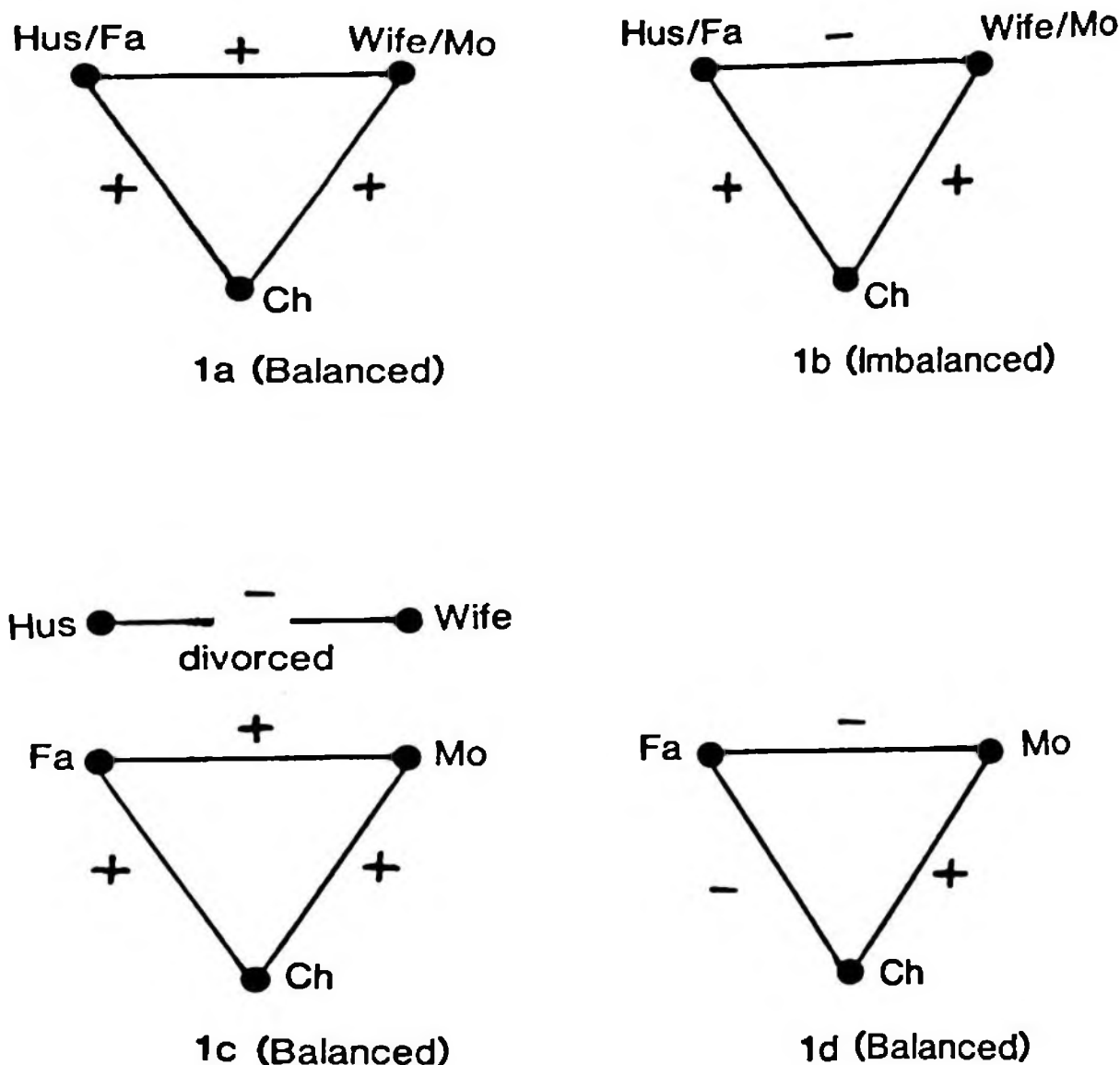


Figure 1.

A. Balance Models of Divorced and Disputing Families

First, we consider a positively balanced family triad. If a husband/father and wife/mother love each other and have a child with whom they are affectionately bonded, then all are connected by kindred ties and the sentiment bonds are mutually positive. This balanced and stable situation is graphed according to the conventional criteria in Figure 1a. Persons are represented as points on the graph, signs + and - represent the sentiment relations of the persons towards one another and connecting lines represent the unit relation.

If the husband and wife are in marital conflict, then the triad is unbalanced and tension will arise in the network, striving to some resolution

(see Figure 1b). According to balance theory, this systemic tension can be relieved in several ways. The parents can of course resolve their differences within the marriage, returning the triad to a balanced state as in Figure 1a. On the other hand, they can separate. If separated or divorced, the family is still in an unbalanced state as the parents have the difficult task of separating from the marriage but retaining the positive bonds in the family. The optimal resolution of this would seem to be that both parents clearly accept and respect that their personal relationship with each other is distinct and separate from their parental relationship with each other and with their children. In this way, balance is brought about in the husband-wife dyad (a mutually negative relationship dissolved by divorce) and in the father-mother-child triad (which is mutually positive and connected by parenting and child-parent bonds). See Figure 1c for an example of these relationships.

In actuality, it seems that regaining system equilibrium typically takes one to two years following a divorce (Hetherington et al. 1982; Wallerstein and Kelly 1980). However, in more than one-half of the families in a nationally representative sample, the problem seems to be resolved by one of the parents (usually the father) rarely or never seeing the children (Fustenberg et al. 1983). Hence, the optimal resolution appears to be far from prevalent because one parent, in response to the painful tension inherent in the imbalance, severs ties with the child.

Within many chronically disputing families, parent-child attachments remain strong. The bonds have acquired an acutely heightened significance, in part because these children have in themselves acquired a special psychological significance for the parent's identity and self-esteem, or have functioned in a special capacity to regulate the parents' continuing relations. These children likewise have strong reciprocal ties with their parents, emanating mostly from their fear of loss and abandonment in the wake of the divorce and their parents' preoccupation with disputes. For whatever reason, we will assume in the following analysis that in this subpopulation of divorced families, the parent-child sentiment bonds are relatively resilient, compared to other bonds in the family, and are not easily severed. On the other hand, these disputing parents are unable to separate out the spousal bonds from the parental. Both remain inextricably fused together as in Figure 1b and the child is made vulnerable, being the central pivot of an unbalanced triad. By this it is meant that while the divorce may have relieved the tensions in the marital unit (to the extent that the parents are now living separately and communicate little), this parental resolution may bring little relief to the child who remains emotionally bonded and spends time with them both. In fact, the systemic tension has merely shifted from the marital subunit to the child-parent subunit. If these divorced parents continue being hostile, bitter, and resentful towards one another, the only

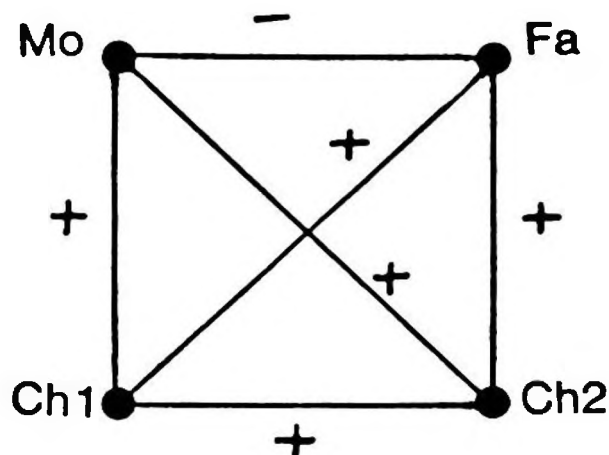
stable resolution for the child is to align with one parent against the other, balancing the triad (see Figure 1d).

In any specific family situation, the particular kind of final resolution is obviously dependent upon the valence of the sentiment bonds, and possibly the relative amount of time the child lives with one rather than the other parent. A child may have developed a special attachment with the mother (heightened by the social significance of motherhood), or may be particularly afraid of losing the father and favors an alignment with him. Because of the need for models of identification, developmental stage and sex of the child are also significant in the parent they choose. Obviously the relatively weaker sentiment bonds are most vulnerable to dissolution when the system is imbalanced. The important general implication of balance theory is that until the divorced parents reconcile their differences or shield their child from their differences, or until the child aligns with one parent against the other, then the social-sentiment relations in the family will be in a state of tension and unstable.

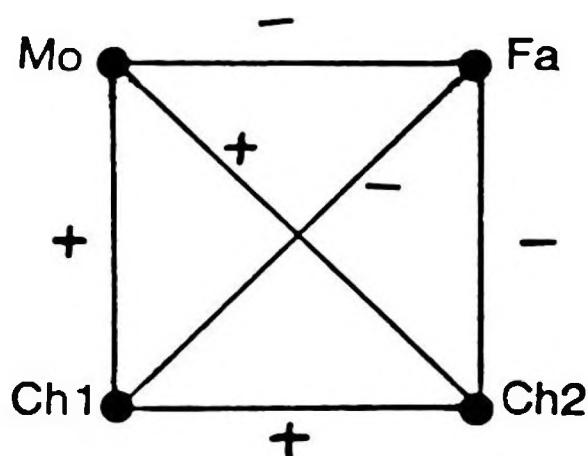
Our clinical findings very clearly support these predictions. Where parents continued to dispute, children typically remained under considerable stress: they withdrew, developed somatic symptoms, and were mildly but chronically depressed. There were also frequent behavioral disturbances in the parent-child relations, especially at the time of transition from one parent's home to the other (Johnston et al. 1985b, 1987, in press). The tension within the child and within the family system continued until the child finally made an alliance with one parent and rejected the other, with varying degrees of intensity. However, what is intriguing is that these alliances did not typically form until the child was in late latency or early adolescence, a fact which will be subsequently demonstrated and discussed.

Returning to our models, if we compare a one-child family as in Figure 1 with a two-child family as in Figure 2, we note that an only child is more at risk as his/her situation is likely to be more unstable. Where there are two or more children of divorced parents there is provision for positive bonds to exist between the children (the sibling dyad) which can ease the acute sense of vulnerability and sense of being torn between the parents. On the other hand, the tension produced by the parental hostilities can be somewhat diffused (or balanced) by sibling rivalries which are less likely to be seriously disruptive to the family system. Essentially there are only two stable resolutions to this imbalance, given that the parents continue to dispute. Either both children reject the same parent (Figure 2b) or each child aligns with a parent against the other, splitting the family in two (Figure 2c).

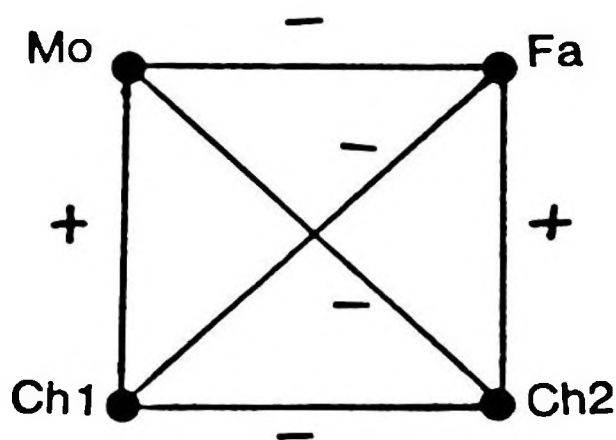
Our clinical impressions support these deductions in that the "only" child did appear to be under greater tension where divorced parents were disputing. In fact, more than two-thirds of our divorced and disputing



2a (Imbalanced)



2b (Balanced)



2c (Balanced)

Figure 2.

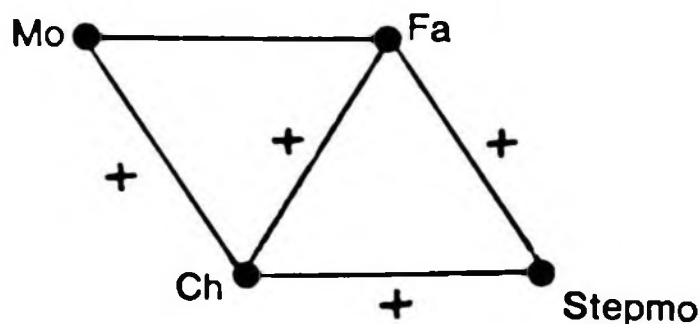
population were only-child families. We also found that the oldest child was more vulnerable, which will be discussed later. Where there were two or more children, they tended to form a coalition against and reject one parent (this being more true for older children). It was less common that the children rejected each other and aligned with each parent as a stable reaction to the divided loyalties although in some cases siblings seemed to have an unconscious contract to maintain family balance by periodically switching alignments. However, we observed that sometimes parents prevented a potential dispute by separating and each taking a child (especially where the children were younger).

In sum, balance theory predicts that unless divorced parents express mutually respectful and positive attitudes towards one another, their children (especially the only child) will be vulnerable to the network imbalance and distressed. Moreover there will be instability in the sentiment relations of the family group until an alignment is formed between one parent and child, excluding the other parent.

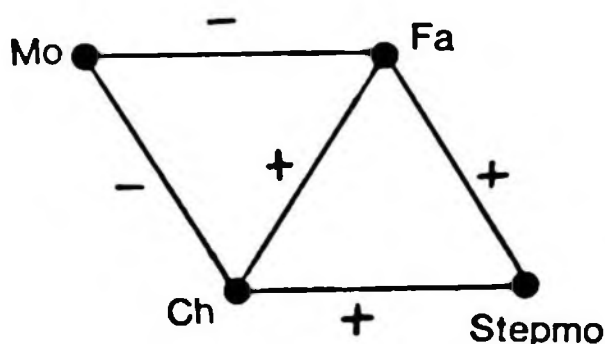
III. THE IMPACT OF REMARRIAGE

Next we consider the situation where one parent remarries or lives in a love relationship with a new partner. In referring to these more complex structures with four or more individuals, note that "balance" continues to refer to the state of the component triads and dyads in the system. We see from Figure 3a that the network is still unbalanced and the child remains the one most vulnerable to the systemic tension since s/he is the one in most contact with both parents. However, the single parent is likely to also feel very vulnerable, being the one most isolated in the family network—i.e., having only one positive bond with the child (see Figure 3a). At the same time, the remarried parent feels more secure having two positively balanced dyads and one positively balanced triad. We suggest that the single parent (in Figure 3 it is the mother) intuitively fears losing her child who can resolve the imbalance in the network by aligning with the new family unit against her (see Figure 3b). There are at least two possible responses. First, the single mother can seek a corresponding significant other (e.g., lover or therapist) to provide support—i.e., another balanced dyad (see Figure 4). Second, the mother can hold onto and perhaps become more seductive to the child, and project negative feelings towards the stepmother (hence balancing the mother-father-stepmother triad). Given the child's stronger attachment with the mother, an alignment with the father is now less likely. So to ease his/her own discomfort in the situation (i.e., to balance the triad with the mother and stepmother), the child is likely to induce a negative sentiment relation with the stepmother also.

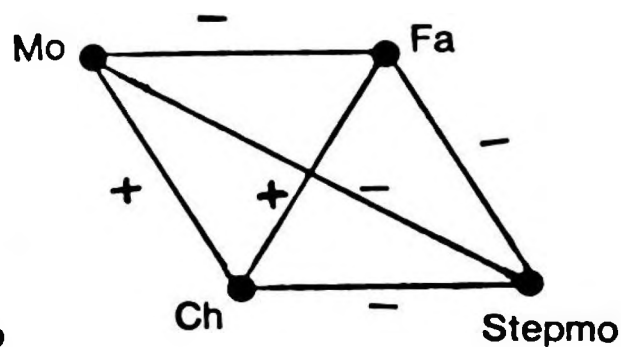
If we focus attention on the new family unit formed by remarriage, we now have a child who is feeling and acting hostile towards the stepmother, thereby throwing the new family unit out of balance. At this point the child can either be chastised for difficult behavior by both the father and stepmother (which is unlikely because of the father-child bond), or marital tension can be generated between them over the child. The latter partial resolution possibility is graphed in Figure 3c where the child is in a more balanced situation at the expense of the new marriage dyad. It is intriguing to note that though the extended family network as a whole has many more negative relations, the child's degree of discomfort has eased when



3a (Imbalanced)



3b (Balanced)



3c (Imbalanced)

Figure 3.

s/he has the father and stepmother fighting. Moreover the single parent (the mother) is less likely to feel so vulnerable.

This analysis is interesting in view of our clinical observations together with those in the literature. We have noted that remarriage of one of the parents (or involvement of a new lover) typically precipitated an outbreak of hostilities over the child. Intuitively one sensed that the remarriage (or new relationship) had upset a precarious equilibrium in the system. Psychological reasons given for this have been in terms of jealousy, fear, and resentment of the single parent. Intense antipathy usually developed between the stepparent and former spouse, even though in many cases they had never met one another. And children seemed to find it easier to target a stepparent than to turn against one of their own parents. Consequently jealousies, rivalries, resentments, constant behavioral disruptions, and apparent attempts by the child to "break-up the new marriage" were observed in remarriages involving children. Many times the new spouse felt a real sense of competition with the child for the parent/spouse's affection and

loyalty (Visher and Visher 1979). The common interpretation has been that the child is still grieving the loss of the primary family unit and has reconciliation fantasies for the parents which s/he is trying to effect. Balance theory illuminates another interpretation of the process, suggesting that it is the propagation of imbalance in interpersonal sentiment relations from one subsystem to the other whose primary source is the hostility between the parents.

Finally, we model the composition of the family network where both parents have remarried. Intuitively one might guess that such extended family systems are more stable and less conflict-ridden. In as much as the new marriages have divested the old marriage of its emotional intensity and diverted the parents from the disputes, then this may be so. However, in those cases where the parents are still bitterly disputing over the child despite the remarriage (and we have seen many such families), then balance models predicts high instability, tension, and turmoil in one or both of the new family systems, mostly via the child who joins the families (see Figure 4a).

In fact, we have found that these divorcing situations are particularly difficult ones and resistant to counseling efforts. The people seem frozen into an immovable stance of unremitting hostility. What happens is that the extended family members (particularly new spouses) form an imposing coalition with each parent, fueling the fires of fury between the two families. Negative relations have been induced between the two remarried couples, balancing each new marital unit, but solidifying the mutually negative relation between the parents (see Figure 4b where we have abstracted the adult relations). As a consequence, the children are severely at risk, being the recipient of total system imbalance since they are in contact with both sides of the warring extended family and the subject of its dispute.

If the parents cannot settle their differences or protect their children, then the only stable resolution for the child is to reject one parent and elect to live in one rather than the other home. This would result in a completely balanced situation as shown in Figure 4c, but at the child's psychological expense of estrangement with one parent, a cornerstone of their identity. If the child is very attached to both parents and cannot resolve the conflicting loyalties in this manner, then a safer move is for the child to induce negative relations with one or both stepparents, easing his/her acute sense of vulnerability in the network but causing disruptions in the immediate family system(s) formed by remarriage (see Figure 4d).

In the above analysis we have, for clarity of exposition, considered only the relations of children with their parents, stepparents, and sibling. However the same principles can be applied to any significant other in the child's network (e.g., grandparents, aunts, teachers, friends, or even the unwitting therapist or attorney). Moreover, if one can define *a priori* which

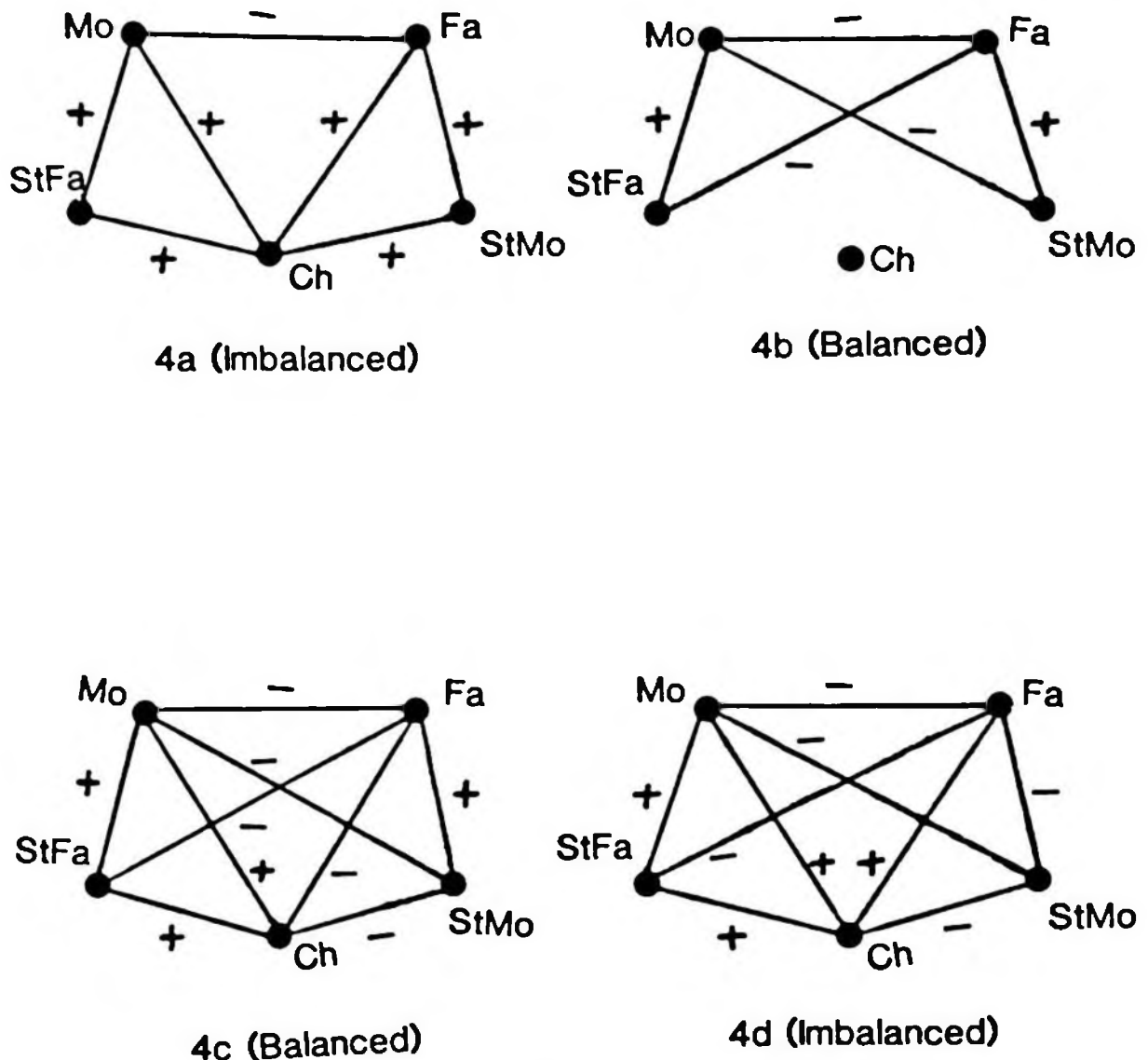


Figure 4.

sentiment bonds are stronger than others, one can predict what kinds of resolutions are most likely. For instance, a child may attach more strongly to the stepparent, or grandparent, and withdraw from or become negative toward the parent(s) in response to imbalance. Finally, in our models we have considered the changes in sentiment and connectedness as emanating mainly from the child's struggles to attain balance. In actuality, the initial moves towards balance may be from others in the system (e.g., a parent or stepparent may withdraw or develop hostility towards the child).

IV. CASE ILLUSTRATION

A brief case vignette may be useful to illustrate the balance principles in operation. Elsbeth, 29 years and Ben, 38 years, ended a stormy violent marriage six years ago and have fought over possession of their daughter

Casey, 8 years, ever since. These parents developed an intense and abiding antipathy for each other and both were fearful of losing the child to the other. This child was a precious commodity, a scarce resource to be shared between two families. Ben regretted he had no access to his only son from a previous marriage and was anxious to secure his daughter. Elsbeth was unable to bear any more children and seemed fearful of being found wanting as a "good mother" to her only child (hence parent to child attachment was particularly strong in this case).

When Ben began living with another woman, Betty, shortly after the marriage ended, Elsbeth sought a series of live-in male friends in a desperate effort to be seen as offering an equally suitable family home for her child. When Ben married Betty five years later, Elsbeth too married within the month. (This illustrates the tendency for networks to expand and incorporate others in order to achieve balance.) While both new partners became supportive loving mates, they quickly came to share the intense dislike for the other parent (as in Figure 4b).

Every slight difference over details of the child's visits escalated into a major confrontation because of the parent's mutual fears and manner of handling perceived threats with counterattacks. Periodically, Ben would rave emotionally about the mother's refusal to share the child more freely and Elsbeth would become hysterical and withhold the child, refusing to consider any compromise. These fights occurred on the telephone or in-person when the child was transferred for court-ordered alternate weekend visits with the father. On more than one occasion, Casey was literally the object of a tug-of-war between the parents with the father trying to wrest her from her mother's grasp. The father felt his daughter was being turned against him because she was becoming withdrawn and unresponsive, especially after he recently broke down in tears and told her he loved her and wanted to see her more often. Casey, a constricted, wary, worried little girl, was presented at our clinic with symptoms of headache and stomach cramps. She told her counselor that she felt responsible for the fights and "wished she were dead." She seemed confused about the situation but whispered that she wished her mother and her stepfather were her real parents and that her father was "just someone ordinary" (i.e., no relative of hers). Then, she anxiously asked the counselor not to tell him "because it would hurt his feelings." (Here we see the child under a great deal of stress, and tending to resolve the imbalance by cognitively disowning and withdrawing from her father.)

Two goals were sought in counseling with this family network. During individual sessions with the child, the counselor restored the father-child bonds which were in danger of being severed. During conjoint sessions with each spouse and stepparent, and at one historic, stormy encounter between both new family units, the counselor tried to resolve the dispute

which would allow the child conflict-free access to both parents. Although parents agreed to restrain their angry fights for the sake of the child, there was little change in their basic attitudes towards one another. They continued to be extremely mistrustful, covertly hostile, and expressed profound dislike for one another.

Casey obviously benefited from the cessation of overt hostilities. Her somatic symptoms quickly disappeared and she began to emerge as a more assertive, confident, and happy child. She began to express more affection for both her parents and seemed to enjoy the visits to her father. However, to the consternation of the counselor, she began to act in a hostile and spiteful manner to her stepmother. She told the counselor her stepmother was "mean," carried tales to her father, and outright lies of mistreatment to her mother. Betty, her stepmother, who had for five years enjoyed a warm relationship with the child, was dismayed by the child's change of attitude and began to develop negative feelings towards her for this obvious troublemaking. She was particularly incensed because Ben could not see what was happening and sided with the child. At this point, Ben and Betty requested marriage counseling.

This case illustrates the balance diagrams in Figure 4. First, note there is a long standing negative relation between the divorced parents and particularly strong attachments between each parent and the child. Both parents remarried, illustrating the tendency for networks of disputing relations to expand and incorporate others in order to achieve balance. As predicted by the theory, the dispute became more entrenched between parents as each of their negative views were shared and supported by the new spouses (Figure 4b). The child was obviously most vulnerable to the system imbalance and showed many stress symptoms. When she attempted to make an alignment with her mother and disown her father, the counselor tried to repair the damaged (or negative) relationship. In the absence of any real diminution of hostility between parents, the father-child attachment was restored at the expense of a negative relationship between stepmother and child (Figure 4c). At this point the child's symptoms of stress disappear indicating some resolution of her imbalance. However the father's new marriage is thrown out of balance by the child's negative relationship with the stepmother (Figure 4d).

A. The Social and Cognitive Maturity of the Child

One important element is missing from our analysis to this point. We have not taken into account the child's *level of understanding* of parental conflicts. Obviously the child's social and cognitive maturity (typically indicated by age) will influence the depth at which the child can comprehend

the parental dispute, and the extent to which s/he can conceptualize the system of disputing relations, as parts or as a whole. In fact, we will argue that stable alignments in response to the imbalance caused by interparental negativity are not likely to occur until children have the cognitive capacity to understand the entire network of sentiment relations.

For this reason, we draw upon child development theories, specifically the work of Selman (1980) who has outlined a developmental sequence for children's understanding of interpersonal relations, and more specifically their grasp of interpersonal conflict. His model is rooted both in the early social-interactionalist writings of Mead (1930) who was interested in role-taking among children and the growth of self, and in structural theories of cognitive and moral development (Piaget 1932; Kohlberg 1969; Flavell et al. 1968). First we will review the relevant features of each of four developmental levels proposed by Selman (1980) which have been supported by extensive observation of children in both laboratory and natural settings. Second, we will describe our clinical findings with respect to how children respond to their disputing parents, for each corresponding level. Figure 5 summarizes these findings and will be referred to during the following discussion.²

At level 0 (approximately 3–6 years) Selman notes the child's perspective taking in social relations is limited to making "physicalistic" distinctions between people, with little awareness that others have distinct, different, or possibly continuing subjective or internal feelings other than those overtly demonstrated. The child's egocentricity is evident in that s/he assumes that others perceive, feel, and think like her/himself. With respect to conflict, the child seems to believe it exists only if it is overtly demonstrated in some physical observable manner (e.g., by yelling or hitting). When such evidence is absent, conflict no longer exists. Children at this stage typically try to resolve conflict by direct physical intervention, avoidance of the issue, or separation of the conflicting parties (with the idea "out of sight, out of mind").

Our clinical observations indicate this level of understanding is most prevalent in very young children (aged 2–3 years), which is somewhat earlier than predicted by Selman. They experienced most tension and stress when they were in the physical presence of both parents who were expressing overt hostility to one another. Parents frequently complained that the transitions from one parent to the other (when the child went on visits to the noncustodial parent) were extremely difficult. It was at these times that the parents usually argued and fought. In response, the child cried, became fearful or stared helplessly. Sometimes they acted to distract the parents from their fight, diverting attention to themselves by being naughty or having a mishap. Some tried to prevent the dispute (e.g., K stood

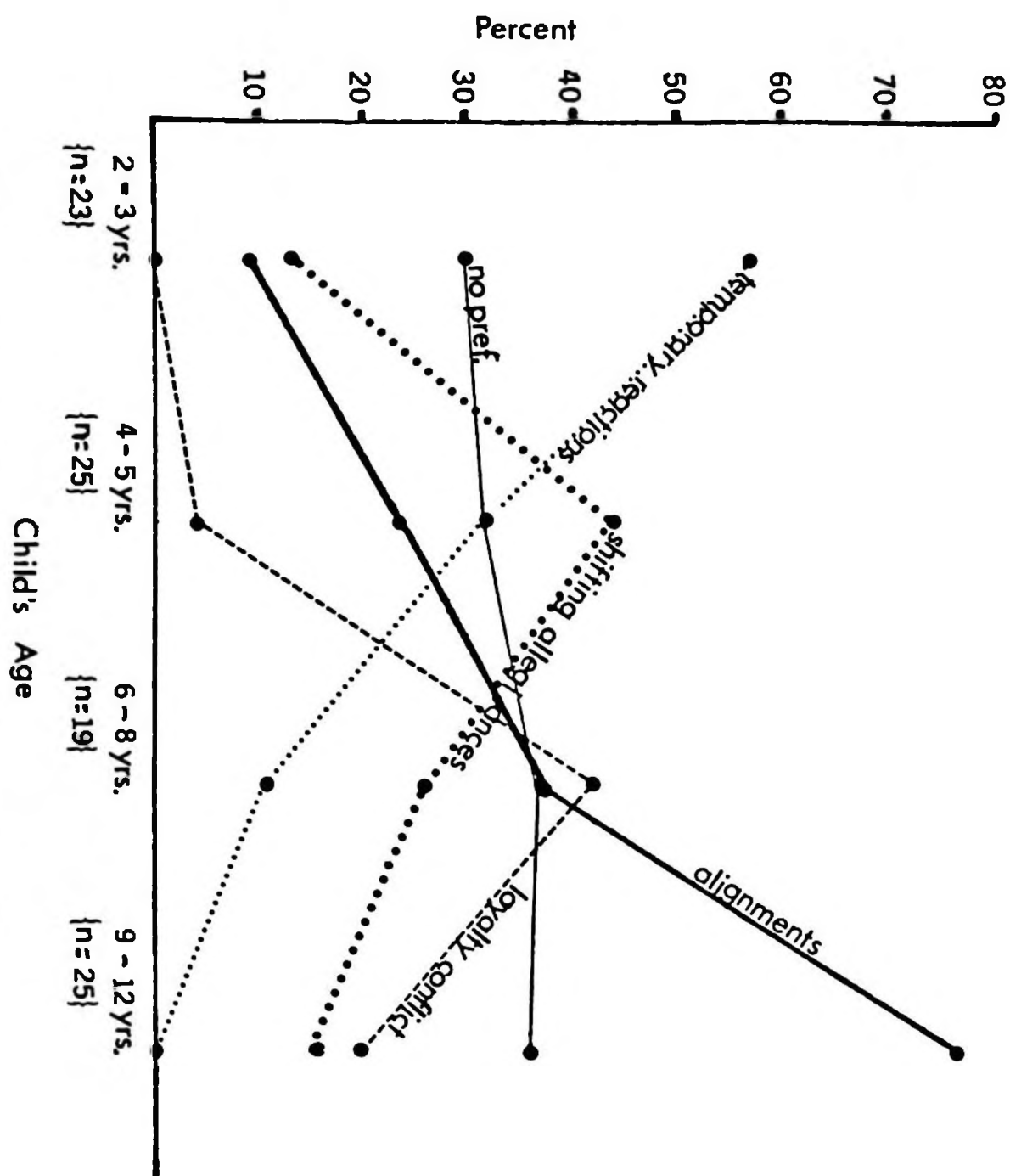


Figure 5. Children's attitudes toward their disputing parents.

between her parents, put her hands up and yelled "stop." T tried to have her parents kiss each other and make up. E tried desperately to have her father leave the daycare center when the mother arrived.)

Some children became more aggressive, willful, and contrary to one parent as if they were identifying with or mimicing the other parent's anger. More typically they would cling to one parent and resist going to the other. These behaviors looked like an elementary alliance but the fact that this involved only a temporary reaction was evidenced by the fact that it disappeared as soon as one parent left and the child was alone with the previously rejected parent. Moreover, on those occasions in which the parents conversed amicably, the child immediately responded warmly to both, appearing delighted at the truce. Despite the great reluctance to go on visits and/or to return home (evidenced by clinging, whining, and crying) there was a rapid adaptation once the transition was effected and the children almost always settled quickly into each parent's environment, relating warmly to either parent (and stepparent if they existed).

The very young child's immediate reaction to overt expression of hostility and the rapid subsidence of anxiety in its absence, implies the child has little cognitive conception of the system of sentiment relations in the family as a whole in any enduring sense. S/he reacts to parts of the system as they become immediate, seeks to achieve a balance of positive secure relationships in the immediate family situation and seems unaware of the parents' continuing internal or private angry feelings towards one another. Hence children of this age typically have *temporary reactions during observable fights and accept both parents at other times*. Figure 5 shows the age-specific distribution of these temporary reactions.

The distinguishing features of Selman's *level 1 (approximately 5-9 years)* is that by this time subjective internal psychological or feeling states are recognized in others and acknowledged as being possibly different from one's own. However, these feelings are perceived as simple unitary states, not mixed ones. For example, one can be happy or sad, but not both. At this stage, the child can take the perspective of another but this is a one-way or unilateral perspective-taking in that only one person's point of view can be considered at one time. Hence with respect to conflict, the child perceives it to be caused by one person and felt by the other. Thus, to resolve conflict, one must negate the offending action, restore the other's comfort, or relieve the distress in some way. The child cannot simultaneously consider how the perceived "offending party" feels about the situation. Nor is there any concern for whether or not the attempts at reparation are sincere efforts. It is sufficient that they are made.

In our clinical observations, this level is predominantly evident in children 4-7 years (again somewhat earlier than Selman predicts). At this age and for the first time, the children became more aware of the content of

the parent's dispute (i.e., the cognitive puzzle of parent's conflicting claims). They were also now aware of a parent's continuing angry feelings about concrete issues. However, they were clearly unable to take the perspective of more than one parent at once. Upon returning home from visits, or when leaving the custodial parent's home, they were often upset and angry about the rights and injustices of one parent. They could accuse the other parent (e.g., "Mom said you didn't pay us any money" or "Daddy said you threw him out of the house"). Accordingly they demanded fairly simplistic restitution on behalf of the offended party. "Daddy says he's sorry and he wants to come back home." Hence, they were easily co-opted into taking sides with respect to concrete issues. However, they were easily "turned around" by the counter-arguments of the other parent, and so the alliances were quite unstable.

The conflicting stories from each parent were obviously confusing and involved some in an endless search for who was lying and who was telling the truth. Their quest invited more pressure from parents who wished to "set the record straight." They also often incurred the wrath of a parent when they dared defend the other. In response, some actively tried to please both sides by carrying stories about the mother to the father and vice versa, greatly exaggerating or completely fabricating the negatives in each home. The outcome of this was usually to consolidate or escalate the bitterness and distrust between the parents. These same children often blamed the stepparent for the problems, could provoke arguments in the new family unit, and seemed both fearful and pleased with the family uproar that resulted. Others, punished or threatened with rejection for taking the side of the other parent, became behaviorally and emotionally constricted, and acted like chameleons. They agreed with the viewpoint of whomever they were with, expressed few feelings, wants or desires separate from those of the caretaking parent, split their lives in two and blocked out the nonpresent parent's world.

In summary, these children tended to avoid or withdraw from situations involving both their disputing parents, formed unstable coalitions with either parent and projected negatives towards a stepparent, sometimes without dissonance and sometimes with a lot of confusion. We classified these children as being in *shifting allegiances*. Figure 5 shows the age-specific distribution of these responses in our sample. The rapid shifts in allegiance during the early school years, seems to indicate the child's developing ability to reflect on the pattern of sentiment relations in the family as a whole, but the confusion and instability suggests that only partial or unilateral perspectives are being processed at one time.

Selman's *Level 2 (7-11 years)* is marked by the child's developing capacity for self-reflexive thinking in social relationships. Not only can s/he take the perspective of the observer of oneself, but the child realized the other

can do the same. There is an infinite regress of possibilities: "I know that she knows that I know." The relationships that are now possible are reciprocal in that both self and others' perspectives can be simultaneously considered. The child can also now acknowledge mixed feelings and degrees of feeling, and makes distinctions between intentional and nonintentional actions of self and others. With respect to conflict, the child can, for the first time, simultaneously experience the juxtaposition of different interests and abiding conflictual feelings, and seeks a solution which will meet the needs of both individual parties. Moreover, the actions of each party need to be genuine or sincere toward one another to be acceptable.

Our clinical observations of children capable of this level of understanding are that they, more than any other group, were anxious, torn, saddened, and constricted by parental disputes. They felt tremendously uncomfortable, caught in the middle of a dangerously complicated situation and helpless. Not surprisingly, somatic symptoms of stress (e.g., headaches, stomach aches, asthma, and allergies) were prevalent.

At this level, for the first time the child seems to conceptualize the whole system of sentiment relations in the family, and becomes most vulnerable to the imbalance. Hence, as shown in Figure 5, loyalty conflicts (defined as verbal and behavioral conflict in preferences for both parents, and affective ambivalence and distress about hurting either or being rejected by either) were prevalent for the age group 6–8 years. These children clearly wanted a relationship with both parents but seemed deeply worried about the consequences. For example, sometimes they would capitulate to the wishes of a mother who did not wish them to visit the father, but with much guilt and worry about hurting the father or being rejected themselves.

In general, these children made several different attempts to cope with the loyalty conflicts, none of which seemed any real or lasting solution to their dilemma. Most tried to remain equidistant from both parents, struggling to retain loyalty with both without losing either. They were obsessed with being very fair to both sides, evened out stories as if to keep a balance sheet, and were more likely to favor a split-time joint custody agreement. Others tried to withdraw and keep their feelings and preferences hidden. They seemed on guard, watchful, and extremely careful about what they said lest it be used in some way against the other parent or themselves in retaliation. They hated to be asked where they wanted to live: they either did not know or did not want to tell. Hence, emotionally they appeared constricted, anxious and somewhat depressed. Others tried to keep their two worlds separate—the mother's from the father's. For example, making telephone calls from one home to the other was avoided. Transitions for visits were anxiety provoking and were to be effected as quickly as possible, preferably at a neutral place. At this stage, children seemed painfully aware that there were no simple solutions to the fights.

As can be seen from Figure 5, pure loyalty conflicts were not sustained for very long because they constituted no resolution to the imbalance, rather they represent the psychological tension experienced by the child in an imbalanced network. Instead, from the middle-to late-elementary school years, alignments typically began to form as the child made a choice for one parent, and with varying degrees of intensity, began to exclude and reject the other parent.

Among one-third of the 6–8 year olds and one-half of the 9–12 year olds, alignments were of moderate intensity and were often secret or private preferences. They involved a definite verbal preference for and behavioral siding with one parent, together with a wish not to hurt the feelings or raise the ire of the other parent. It was accompanied by affective dislike towards, withdrawal from, and resistance to spending time with the other parent. However, residues of ambivalence and loyalty conflict were evident. For example, they did not want to tell the parent directly that they did not want to live with him. They softened their preference by saying they wanted to live in the preferred parent's neighborhood, or they asked the counselor to tell the parent. Interestingly, legal custody disputes were often precipitated when a child began to make such an alignment because the rejected parent, sensing the child's withdrawal, sought to prevent the impending loss by appealing to the court.

However, among more than one-fourth of the older children, the alliances were overtly hostile and unshakable stances in which the child stridently rejected one parent and refused to see or visit him/her. These children tended to split their two parents into the "good" and the "bad and mad." One parent was seen as all virtuous, protective, dependable, powerful and the other perceived as undependable, crazy, disruptive, and sometimes scary. These views were fixed and rigid and often considerable distortion of the facts were necessary to maintain their solid stand. What is most remarkable, but predicted by balance theory, is that once a strong alignment was formed, these children were free of anxiety and guilt, and cognitively clear as if a difficult dilemma had been resolved.

It should be noted, however, that alliances were not formed in a social vacuum. In many cases parents were actively or covertly encouraging and condoning the child's rejection and hostility toward the other parent. In other cases, the rejected parent quickly escalated the intensity of the alliance by responding in angry retaliation to the hurt and indignity of the child's rejection. Once formed, however, the alliances had a life of their own, independent of parents' support and were extremely resistant to counseling efforts to change them.

In summary, it appears that whereas the younger elementary school child attempts to remain equidistant to each disputing parent, suffering considerable loyalty conflict, the older child finds it harder to maintain a neutral

or even position. Figure 5 shows that alignments predominate among children 9–12 years. The alliances typically seen at this age possibly result from a convergence of developmental facts: the child's capacity to conceptualize the whole system of sentiment relations in the family, together with his/her tendency to uncompromising moral views of the situation in concrete and absolute terms, together with the pressure from the family members to take a more active role in the parental fight. All of these coincide to make it more imperative that the only tenable resolution of the imbalance for the child is a form coalition with one parent against the other. Once this occurs, the child has resolved the systemic tension and not surprisingly shows little or no tension.

At level 3 (10–15 years), Selman notes that the adolescent child is capable of third person or mutual perspective-taking. This involves simultaneously including and coordinating the perspective of self and other from a third person or generalized other's viewpoint. At this point, the child may be said to have an "observing ego," or a critical distance from the whole system of relationships. Recognizing the existence of enduring personality, the young person at this point can acknowledge incompatibilities in values, needs and beliefs of self and others. Full resolution of conflict is seen as possible only when a mutual fulfillment of needs is attainable (mutuality being more than individual needs being reciprocally satisfied). In fact, satisfying or good relationships are viewed as ongoing systems in which thoughts, feelings, and experiences are mutually shared.

Since our study of children in custody disputes included only those aged 2–12 years, we had little opportunity to observe the consequences of this level of interpersonal understanding. However, several children (one as young as 8 years), spoke about their parents' conflict with startling clarity and wisdom beyond their years. They presented somewhat cynical, jaundiced or pessimistic views of both parents or spoke with insight and loving concern about their parents' problems. They believed quite realistically that the fight would never end and had taken steps to care for themselves. Some made strategic alignments with a parent who provided them a window of escape, other strategically withdrew from the parental fight and developed diplomatic relations with both sides of the warring factions, or they manipulated both parents and exploited the divided rule to get what they wanted. All of these responses seemed indicative of the capacity to take a third person perspective, hence gaining a critical distance from the conflictual family relations. However, our observations of these responses were limited.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

What is the utility of this analysis, what does balance theory tell us about divorcing families that is not intuitively obvious or easily observable? First

we will consider the limitations of the theory and then its unique contributions. There are a number of problems with balance theory, as originally formulated, that have long been recognized as its pitfalls. First, it is too simplistic in that it does not differentiate the nature of unit bonds nor the strength of sentiment relations. For this reason it is not a discriminating theory to apply to intimate family bonds which are highly differentiated in quality and valence. It follows from the first problem that it is an indeterminate theory—i.e., there are a number of resolution possibilities to imbalanced situations and the theory does not predict precisely which is most likely to occur. Nor does the theory describe clearly the nuances of ambivalence as children, in response to imbalance, can both distance themselves psychologically or physically *and* become more or less negative towards others. Hence it is a somewhat crude model of human relations.

On the other hand, if we make some *a priori* assumptions about the strength of unit bonds (e.g., that parents remain negative toward one another and children are extremely attached to both parents), balance theory becomes a useful analytic and predictive tool with which to examine the systemic properties of very complex family situations. Broadly it achieves two things: First, it charts the *process* by which parental hostility propagates negative feelings throughout the other subsystems of the family network. It identifies those family members whose positions are most unbalanced (causing them the greatest amount of psychological tension) and shows how their attempts at resolution cause distress for other members. Balance theory provides a dynamic model of these changes. Second, it yields a number of interesting implications about the *outcome* or the effects of parents hostility on extended family relations, not all of which are obvious. In summary these effects are:

- a. where parents continue to dispute bitterly following divorce, their child is placed in an untenable situation and is likely to show tension, anxiety, confusion and divided loyalties.
- b. at least one parent is always in danger of being rejected by the child as a way of resolving the untenable situation.
- c. if the child remains bonded to both parents, s/he will try to resolve the tension of conflicting loyalties by becoming hostile towards and inducing negative sentiment relations with other family members, particularly stepparents. This can be disruptive to the new marriage.
- d. this highly negative extended family situation (described in c) may be more preferable to the child compared to the one where negative feelings exist *only* between the divorced parents.

Moreover, balance theory becomes more useful in exploring the impact of parental hostility upon the network of family relations, if we take into

account the social and cognitive maturity of the child. The instability predicted in the extended family system is relatively minor in the case of young preschool children who react to parental disputes only when they are physical and observable, and who seek a balance of positive secure relations in whichever immediate family situation they find themselves. In contrast, we expect more rapid fluctuations in the sentiment bonds of divorcing families with early school-age children who can take the perspective of only one person at a time, become confused, and form unstable coalitions with parent or become capriciously negative towards stepparents. When children develop self-reflexive capacities and can coordinate the viewpoints of both their parents, they become most vulnerable to the psychological tensions caused by the mother-father-child triad. Hence, the instability in the network peaks or reaches a crisis point for older elementary school children who are likely to finally resolve the imbalance in the network as a whole by rejecting one parent and forming an alignment with the other, thus splitting the extended family network in two. In sum, as children become older, more conflict, stress and crisis are anticipated in the remarried family unit with the child becoming more hostile towards or distancing themselves from a parent or stepparent. The upset by this split should diminish as the older teenager (who is generally less dependent upon the family) strategically withdraws from the conflict or develops diplomatic relations with their opposing parents and respective new spouses.

These ideas are supported by extensive clinical observations both in our study and in that of Wallerstein and Kelly (1974, 1975, 1976, 1980; Kelly and Wallerstein 1975). If this series of predictions are corroborated in more systematically gathered data, the findings would have important implications for recent social policy which encourages the continual involvement of both parents in the care of their children following divorce. Psychologically, it is usually extremely important for the child to have both the mother and father involved in his/her growth and development. Balance theory and our clinical observations indicate that this may place the extended system of family relations under a great deal of strain, unless parents can resolve their differences over the children.

It is not the purpose of this paper to report the impact of these imbalanced family relations on the psychological development of the child, this being the subject of our continuing investigation. There is an intriguing suggestion in our findings, however, that the children of parental disputes, as a group, show precocious social-cognitive maturity compared to Selman's normative studies. On the other hand, a subgroup of these children were retarded or stuck at low levels of social-cognitive development, suggesting that entry into higher levels was avoided because a full understanding of the conflictual relations would be too painful to tolerate. These hypotheses need further confirmation.

Although it is not the purpose of this paper to detail all of the strategies for treating these families (these being embedded in our other papers), there are several important clinical intervention principles that derive from this analysis. In general, mediation and counseling efforts need to be directed at the entire extended family system where divorced parents are disputing the care and custody of their children. If not, mediated agreements are easily sabotaged, arbitrated settlements countermanded and conflicts are likely to erupt in yet another subsystem of the family. Any attempt to restore or protect a parent-child relationship should take into consideration the ramifications on other subsystems in the family. Stepparents especially need support and understanding and remarried partners need special counseling to cope with the legacy of the child's confused allegiances and divided loyalties emanating from the parents' unresolved disputes. We are exploring the idea of using simple balance diagrams to show some families what is happening and help relieve the guilt, confusion and anger they feel. However understanding is not enough.

Since the parental disputes are usually the core or primary problem, every attempt must be made to resolve these. This is not always possible. In planning a strategic intervention into the family network, it is first important to assess the degree to which there is movement or flux in the sentiment relations. If there is considerable flux, denoting imbalance, one can use the tension in the system to motivate change towards a more viable or positively balanced state. At this point great care needs to be taken to ensure the clinicians do not unwittingly participate in an alignment which then discredits and disempowers them in dealing with other subsystems in the network. Where the sentiment relations are fixed or frozen into a state of unremitting hostility (denoting balance), the first intervention should be aimed at destabilizing the total system in order to gain leverage for change. We have learned that timing is an essential element in this endeavor. It is important to intervene early during the period of family disequilibrium at parental separation. Otherwise pathologically balanced states set-in which institutionalize the hostilities. It is also important to intervene when the children are younger, when they are likely to make only temporary or shifting allegiances or be in loyalty conflicts. Once alignments are formed, they are extremely difficult to shift until the child is advanced in the teenage years.

For the reader interested in more general group processes or for those concerned about other small group settings like work organizations, the focus of this analysis on divorced and disputing families should not deter from its more general applicability. Conflict in groups and organizations could be analyzed in similar ways. Disputes between critical dyads or triads are likely to propagate disturbance from one subsystem to another and produce continuous instability in the organization or group as a whole.

Depending on the group members' access to information about the conflict and their capacity to conceptualize the system of disputing relations, certain individuals (or positions) within the network are more vulnerable to the systemic tension than others and their attempts to ameliorate the tension are likely to have crucial implications for the stability of the group.

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NOTES

1. Our observations are made from a clinical research project which specialized in counseling this population of chronically disputing families. Our project offers a short-term, child-oriented counseling service for divorced and disputing families where parents have been unable to reach a stable settlement to custody and visitation issues. The families, which are multi-ethnic and low-middle income, are referred by the local family courts after failing to settle their differences within attorney negotiation and mandatory mediation sessions. These cases then are generally regarded as the more difficult ones in that they are not clearly amenable to mediation and need more extensive intervention to resolve the disputes, help the parents separate from the marriage and protect their most vulnerable children. A full description of the characteristics of the sample and methods of observation are available elsewhere (Johnston et al. 1985a, 1985b, 1986; Campbell and Johnston 1986, in press).

2. Counselors rated the children's primary responses to their disputing parents in terms of five possibilities:

- a. *alignment*: behavioral and verbal preference for one parent, together with varying degrees of overt or covert negativity toward the other parent.
- b. *loyalty conflict*: verbal and behavioral conflict in preferences for both parents, together with affective ambivalence and distress about hurting either or being rejected by either.
- c. *shifting allegiances*: inconsistent overt or covert preference for one parent and then the other, accompanied by corresponding swings in negative and positive affect.
- d. *temporary reactions*: affective and behavioral distress, clinging or anger in the immediate presence of disputing parents and acceptance of both at other times.
- e. *no preferences* includes early expressed liking or disliking for both parents, and avoidance of choice.

Two thirds of the children could be easily classified into one of the primary categories. The other third had mixed responses during the counseling period, especially the older children. They were classified under two primary categories. Two independent raters classified the responses and any discrepancies in their judgements were resolved by discussion and consensus among three clinicians.

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